

Anna Burnham:

Good morning, and welcome to morning prayers at Memorial Church. Please note a correction to your program. Today's speaker is Esther Lawrence, a senior in the college and a member of Memorial Church's Student Advisory Board. Today's service will begin with a responsive reading from the Black Appleton Salter book, Psalm 55, found on page 28. Please remain masked and stand as you are able to read responsively by the whole verse. Hear my prayer, oh, God. Do not hide yourself from my petition terror.

Congregation:

Listen to me and answer me; I have no peace, beware of my course.

Anna Burnham:

I am shaken by the noise of the enemy and by the pressure of the wicked.

Congregation:

For they cast an evil spell upon me, and are set against me in fury.

Anna Burnham:

My heart quakes within me and the terrors of death have fallen upon me.

Congregation:

Fear and trembling have come over me, and horror overwhelms me.

Anna Burnham:

And I said, "Oh, that I had wings like a dove. I would fly away and be at rest."

Congregation:

For had it been an adversary who taunted me, then I could have borne it; or had it been enemies who wanted themselves against me, then I could have hidden from them.

Anna Burnham:

But it was you, someone after my own heart, my companion, my own familiar friend.

Congregation:

We took sweet counsel together, and walked with the throng in the house of God.

Anna Burnham:

Cast your burden upon God, who will sustain you.

Audience:

God will never let the righteous stumble.

Choir:

(singing).

Esther Lawrence:

I'd like to begin with a quote. "The basic project of art is always to make the world whole and comprehensible, to restore to us in all its glory and its occasional nastiness, not argument, but through feeling. And then, to close the gap between you and everything that is not you. And in this way, to pass from feeling to meaning." I've been fixated on this quote from Australian art critic, Robert Hughes, since discovering it in my first year of college. Hughes captures a lot of in this admittedly protracted sentence, but essentially, claims that by moving us without argument, without rhetoric or politics, to transcend our self-orientation, art allows us to make sense of the world.

The central claim of Hughes's argument is that the gap that exists between ourselves and everything that is outside of ourselves is the key obstacle preventing us from finding meaning in life. During my years-long appreciation for this quote, I've attempted to determine how to close this gap. How can we transcend our self orientation and pass from feeling to meaning on a daily basis? Is art in the formal sense, as Hughes argues, really the only way to do this? Before the pandemic, I certainly, like a lot of Harvard College students, was very focused on self-improvement and on personal goals. I admittedly spent a lot of time in my own head thinking about myself. In short, the gap between me and everything that is not me felt particularly large. And proving Hughes's point, my days also felt particularly meaningless.

At some point, during the sudden halt of normal life last year, I returned to Hughes's quote to find a remedy for this feeling. I began to try to find art in the everyday. The effort was not just an attempt to increase my observation of the world around me, but to actually let those observations move me. How amazing to laugh with my parents in the kitchen over dinner. How special that there is still dew on the grass in the morning and that it catches the light just so. How incredible that when I listen to this song, my heartbeat slows to match its rhythm. In this practice of seeking the art in the everyday, I realize that the power that Hughes attributes to art extends beyond art in the formal sense.

But also, I realized that as a believer in God, this practice was an extension of my religion. If we believe that God created everything and that he touches all aspects of life, an attempt to close the gap between ourselves and everything that is not us, is really an attempt to close the gap between ourselves and God. Fundamental tenants of Christianity like love, charity, gratitude, prayer are all acts which close the gap between us and God or us and other things in our world. It is no wonder to me then that after a few weeks of seeking the art in the world, of seeking wonder that I felt spiritually revived. I felt calmer, more present in conversations, more willing to be giving. I wasn't ignorant of the bad things in the world by any means. In fact, I felt the weight of those things more too. This was because, just as Hughes promise could occur through experiencing art, I had regained a capacity for feeling that gave life more meaning.

To close, I invite you to join me in prayer. Dear Lord. Even as many of us have returned to life in person, we still struggle to seek out the art in your creation. Lord, please help us to revel a bit more, to wonder, to be awe-struck. In doing so, help us to close the gap between us and everything that is not us. And in this way, to pass from feeling to meaning. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Please stand as you are able, and together, let us pray the words that Jesus taught us. Our father, who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy kingdom come, thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against

us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Congregation:

[crosstalk 00:12:43] be done on earth as it is in heaven. Give us this day our daily bread, and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us. And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil. Thine is the kingdom, and the power, and the glory forever and ever. Amen.

Anna Burnham:

Together, let us sing the hymn, Father, We Praise Thee, now the night is over. Number 37, found in your Crimson Harvard hymnal.

Congregation:

(silence). (singing).

Anna Burnham:

The Lord be with you.

Audience:

And also with you.

Anna Burnham:

The service has ended. Let us go in peace to love and serve the Lord.